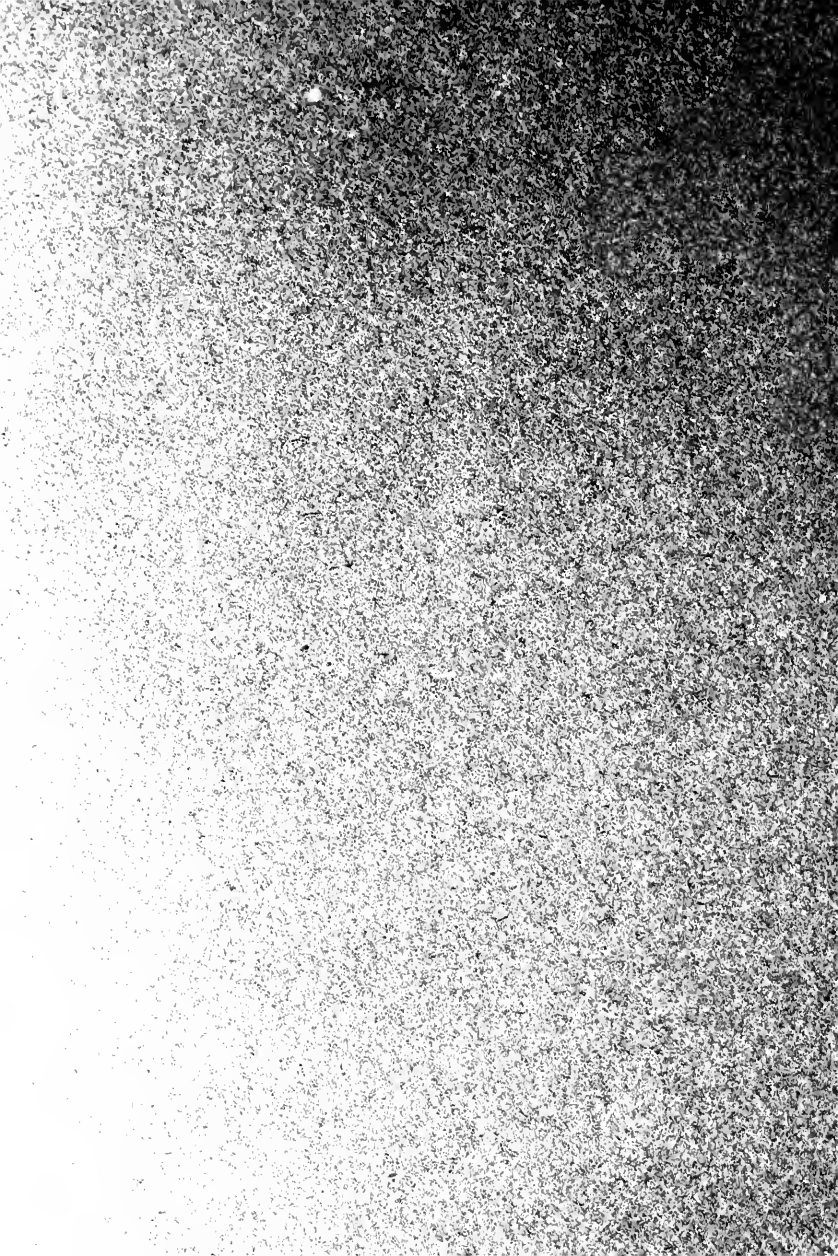




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WHERE TO HOUSE THE LONDON POOR.

BY

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THE HOUSING OF THE LONDON POOR.

WHERE TO HOUSE THEM.

WHATEVER reforms may be introduced into the dwellings of the London poor, it will still remain true that the whole area of London is insufficient to supply its population with fresh air and the free space that is wanted for wholesome recreation. A remedy for overcrowding of London will still be wanted. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that there are large classes of the population of London whose removal into the country would be in the long-run economically advantageous—that it would benefit alike those who moved and those who remained behind.

The first effect of the mechanical inventions of the last century was to scatter the manufacturing industries over the country in search of water power: the development of steam power made it possible for them to come back to the towns. Early in this century the advantages of a town life were very great for the manufacturers; for communication of all kinds was slow and dear, and every branch of industry was changing its form and methods rapidly. Those who lived out in the country had great difficulty in keeping themselves acquainted with all that was going on in their trades. Even if they knew what ought to be done, they could not easily keep their machinery abreast of the age; employers were at a disadvantage in buying and selling, and in getting any particular kind of skilled labour they might suddenly need; and employé's found themselves too much in the hands of individual employers. So the tide set strongly towards the towns.

But as the century wore on, and communication was opened up, the special advantages which residence in large towns offered to producers gradually diminished. Railways, the cheap post, the telegraph, general newspapers and trade newspapers, and organized associations

among employers and employed, all had a share in the change. Meanwhile space in the towns was becoming more and more valuable for trading and for administrative and other purposes; and manufacturers began to doubt whether the special advantages of the town were worth the high ground-rents that they had to pay there. Sir Titus Salt, a pioneer in this as in other ways, saw that he would gain himself and benefit those who worked for him by moving out of Bradford. So he founded Saltaire out in the country, and thus realized at once one of the most wholesome and substantial ambitions that the socialists have set before themselves—that of combining the advantages of the town and the country. Saltaire, itself a considerable town, and within a few minutes' ride of large towns, offers all the quickening influences that man gets from close and varied contact with his fellows. At the same time, it has cheap rents, fresh air, wholesome out-door amusements for young and old; the nerves are not overwrought, and the physique does not ^{de}generate. Saltaire is exceptional in many ways; and it is apt to suffer from too close a dependence on one trade. But this evil is in some measure avoided, while nearly all the advantages of Saltaire are secured, by the semi-rural manufacturing districts that are growing up in many parts of the country, and drawing the manufacturers away from the great towns. Manchester, Leeds, and Lyons are no longer the great homes of the cotton, the woollen, and the silk industries. They are the trading centres of manufacturing districts, over which these industries have now scattered themselves. The mere carmen, railwaymen, warehousemen, and messengers in Manchester are far more in number than all the men engaged in the textile industries, and not very much less than those engaged in the textile and iron industries put altogether.

But there are other producing industries, which are carried on not so much in factories as in workshops and at home, which are not so ready to seek the fresh air. The causes of this are chiefly morbid, and their action is most conspicuous and most calamitous in London.

The industrial condition of London has several peculiarities. It has grown round many villages which were at one time remote from its boundaries, and which, if its growth had not been so vast, would have become industrial districts interspersed with green fields.

Next, it has special attractions that draw to it from far and wide many different classes of people. Large as its population is, its demand for the best products of the most highly skilled work is very much larger in proportion. And a legitimate ambition brings, and always will bring, many of the finest workers in the country to it. For different reasons it is an attractive field for many at the opposite end of the industrial scale. Crowds of people go there because they are impatient and reckless, or miserable and purposeless; and because they hope to prey on the charities, the follies, and the vices that are nowhere so richly gilded as there.

No doubt those who go to London, taken altogether, are above the average in strength. But residence for many generations amid smoke, and with scarcely any of the pure gladness of bright sunshine and green fields, gradually lowers the physical constitution. It is said that this deterioration is seen even in families where high wages are earned and well spent; that the thoroughbred Londoner is seldom a perfect workman, and that the reputation of London work is maintained chiefly by those who were born, or whose parents were born, elsewhere. Even if this statement be somewhat exaggerated, it is certain that when, through any cause, the income of a family falls off, or when its income is not well spent, the family deteriorates rapidly in London. Doubtless many of the poor things that crouch for hire at the doors of London workshops are descended from vigorous ancestors, and owe their degradation partly to misfortune and partly to the taste for drink that misfortune at once begets under the joyless London sky. But a great many more of them have a taint of vice in their history. The descendants of the dissolute are naturally weak, and especially those of the dissolute in large towns. It is appalling to

think how many of the poor of London are descendants of the dissolute.

Thus there are large numbers of people with poor physique and a feeble will, with no enterprise, no courage, no hope, and scarcely any self-respect, whom misery drives to work for lower wages than the same work gets in the country. The employer pays his high rent out of his savings in wages; and they have to pay their high rents out of their diminished wages. This is the fundamental evil.

It is reasonable that those who can earn high wages should work in London, if they happen to like London; because they can afford to live a fairly healthy life there. They can house themselves comfortably in London, or they can in many cases live in the suburbs, and come in to their work. Not nearly all the watchmakers, engineers, &c., who work in London, are really bound to work there; but no great harm is done by their being there.

Again, those large numbers of workmen of lower grades who are really wanted to supply the needs of London must of course live there. If their numbers were not excessive, the ordinary law of competition would keep up their wages as much above those of similar work elsewhere, as the rents they have to pay exceed the rents for similar accommodation elsewhere.

But there are other kinds of labour which are everywhere lowly paid, and which make goods, not to meet the wants of individual consumers, but for the general market: it is unreasonable and a sign of social disease that these should be housed in London. The industries that thus linger on are chiefly those in which the workers are scattered, not able easily to organize themselves, and most at the mercy of the unscrupulous employer; those industries, in short, which are shunned by the hearty and strong, and are the refuge of the weak and broken-spirited.

The distribution of the industries of London is indeed just what would naturally follow from the causes that, as we have just seen, determine the character of its population. First come those whose work is necessary in London. Those

engaged in domestic service are nearly 400,000, if we count the 50,000 washerwomen in this class. There are about 150,000 engaged in carrying and storage, and 120,000 in building. There is a large but not easily ascertained number of assistants in shops; and some of the 78,000 general labourers are no doubt bound to be in London. In all these industries the supply of labour conforms itself to the demand, and is not affected by the special character of the population of London.

But in those industries the work of which could, in great part at least, be done out of London, the supply of labour is determined by the character of the population, and the demand follows the supply. In these industries the chief groups are 45,000 in the printing and allied trades, 40,000 in the furniture and decorative trades, 35,000 in the engineering and other branches of the ordinary metal trades, 20,000 workers in gold and makers of watches and other delicate instruments, and 15,000 makers of carriages, ships, and boats. In all these groups, especially in the second, there are some low-waged workers; but in the main they are high-waged, and can afford to live comfortably in London. There are further a great many minor industries, mostly very small; some of them are skilled industries, but the greater part are very poorly paid. They have a prominent place in some recent descriptions of London life. The total number of those engaged in them, though much less than is often thought, is yet very considerable. And lastly, there is the great characteristic group of London industries—that of the clothes-making trades. Of the 150,000 or more hired workers in these trades, by far the greater part are very poorly paid, and do work which it is against all economic reason to have done where ground-rent is high. There are, including employers, 70,000 milliners, &c., there are 18,000 female tailors, and 26,000 shirtmakers and seamstresses.

It is clear, then, that of the industries in which the supply of labour is determined, not by the demand, but by the character of the population, the great majority are either very highly paid or very poorly paid. The intermediate class, those who cannot afford to live comfortably in London,

but yet have not had their spirit crushed out of them, are comparatively few in number; most of them have left London. But the very weak and poorly paid want help. If they were horses they would get it fast enough; a weak horse is sent off into the country, where stable-room is cheap; people cannot afford to have any but strong horses in London. Surely time and money devoted to helping the feeble and timid to move and carry their work with them are better spent than in diminishing some of the evils of their lives in London. In London, even when their houses are whitewashed, the sky will be dark; devoid of joy, they will still tend to drink for excitement; they will go on deteriorating; and, as to their children, the more of them grow up to manhood the lower will be the average physique and the average morality of the coming English generation. Meanwhile they take up space which, if they were gone, would give room for those who must remain to breathe more freely, and for their children to play.

Before considering what direct steps may be taken for this purpose, it will be well to look at the effect of the enforcement of sanitary laws. They have been considered chiefly in their bearing on those who have lived and will go on living in London; but account must also be taken of their bearings on the movements of the population.

The population of London is already migratory in a great measure. One out of five of those now living who were born in London has already gone elsewhere. Of those who are now in London more than a third were born elsewhere, and a great many more are the young children of those who have recently come there. There are about 800,000 females living in London who were born elsewhere. Only a small part of them can be domestic servants, for the total number of these is only 240,000. Of these immigrants a great part do no good to themselves or to others by coming to London; and there would be no hardship in deterring the worst of them from coming by insisting on strict regulations as to their manner of living there.

It would be possible to do this, by a just discrimination,

without pressing too severely on the old inhabitants, if Mr. Llewellyn Davies' proposal as to inspection were acted on. According to this, the most important perhaps of all the suggestions that have been made on the subject, specially bad districts would be "proclaimed;" they would be inspected by a large staff of officers in a rigorous, uncompromising way, that could not be applied universally without involving needless expense and needless vexation. If it got to be known that these officers would enforce the letter of the law rigidly and without mercy on all new-comers, a good many shiftless people who now come to London would stay where they are, or be induced to go straight to the New World, where the shiftless become shiftful. The old settlement laws were wrong, because they were selfish rules for preventing people from going to legitimate employment; but to hinder people from going where their presence helps to lower the average standard of human life, is no more contrary to economic principle than the rule that when a steamer is full, admission should be refused to any more, even though they themselves are willing to take the risk of being drowned.

The analogy of the passenger steamer will help us further. It is a hardship to take away the license of a short-sighted captain for running his vessel ashore; it is a greater hardship not to do it. It is a question whether every house-owner in "proclaimed" districts should not require a license. Anyhow, those who cannot manage their houses properly, and exercise a due control over the sanitary habits of their tenants, should be fined till they sell them to others who can. But all changes must be gradual; it is a mistake to propound regulations that cannot be enforced. The house-room insisted on for each person, and the free space insisted on between the houses, should start from a workable level, and increase steadily and surely till a high standard is attained.

The thorough carrying out of such rules, left to itself, would before long rid London of its superfluous population; those only would live there who were really wanted there;

and competition for their labour would compel rich London to pay, as it can well afford to do, high enough wages to cover the cost of good accommodation. The suffering caused on the way would be as nothing compared with the ultimate gain ; and if the suffering could not be prevented, it should not be shirked. But there is no more urgent duty, no more truly beneficent work, than to deprive progress of its partial cruelty by helping away those who lie in the route of its chariot wheels.

Even among the landlords there are a few, probably a very few, whose cases afford a plea, not for relaxing the law, but for charitable aid to them. But the chief field for charity will be in helping the poor to live better in London, and to live better out of London.

Nearly all the schemes for enabling the poor to live better in London tend to raise their self-respect as well as to make them more comfortable, and by so doing help them indirectly to live out of London. But such schemes, admirable as they are, require to be worked in conjunction with other schemes for directly helping the poor to move out.

The task gives special facilities for attack in detail, chiefly because there is so little fixed capital in the industries to be attacked ; no one experiment need involve great outlay or great risk. There might be great variety in method ; but the general plan would probably be for a committee, whether formed specially for the purpose or not, to interest themselves in the formation of a colony in some place well beyond the range of London smoke. After seeing their way to building or buying suitable cottages there, they would enter into communication with some of the employers of low-waged labour. They would select at first industries that use very little fixed capital ; and, as we have seen, it fortunately happens that most of the industries which it is important to move are of this kind. They would find an employer—and there must be many such—who really cares for the misery of his employés. Acting with him and by his advice, they would make themselves the friends of people employed, or fit to be employed, in his

trade; they would show them the advantages of moving, and help them to move both with counsel and money. They would organize the sending of work backwards and forwards, the employer perhaps opening an agency in the colony. The committee might well keep up permanently a friendly connection with the colony. But after being once started it ought to be self-supporting; for the cost of carriage, even if the employé's went in sometimes to get instructions, would be less than the saving made in rent—at all events, if allowance be made for the value of the garden produce. And more than as much again would probably be saved by removing the temptation to drink that is caused by the sadness of London. They would meet with much passive resistance at first. The unknown has terrors to all, but especially to those who have lost their natural spring. Those who have lived always in the obscurity of a London court might shrink away from the free light; poor as are their acquaintanceships at home, they might fear to go where they knew no one. But with gentle insistence the committee would urge their way, trying to get those who knew one another to move together, by warm patient sympathy taking off the chill of the first change.

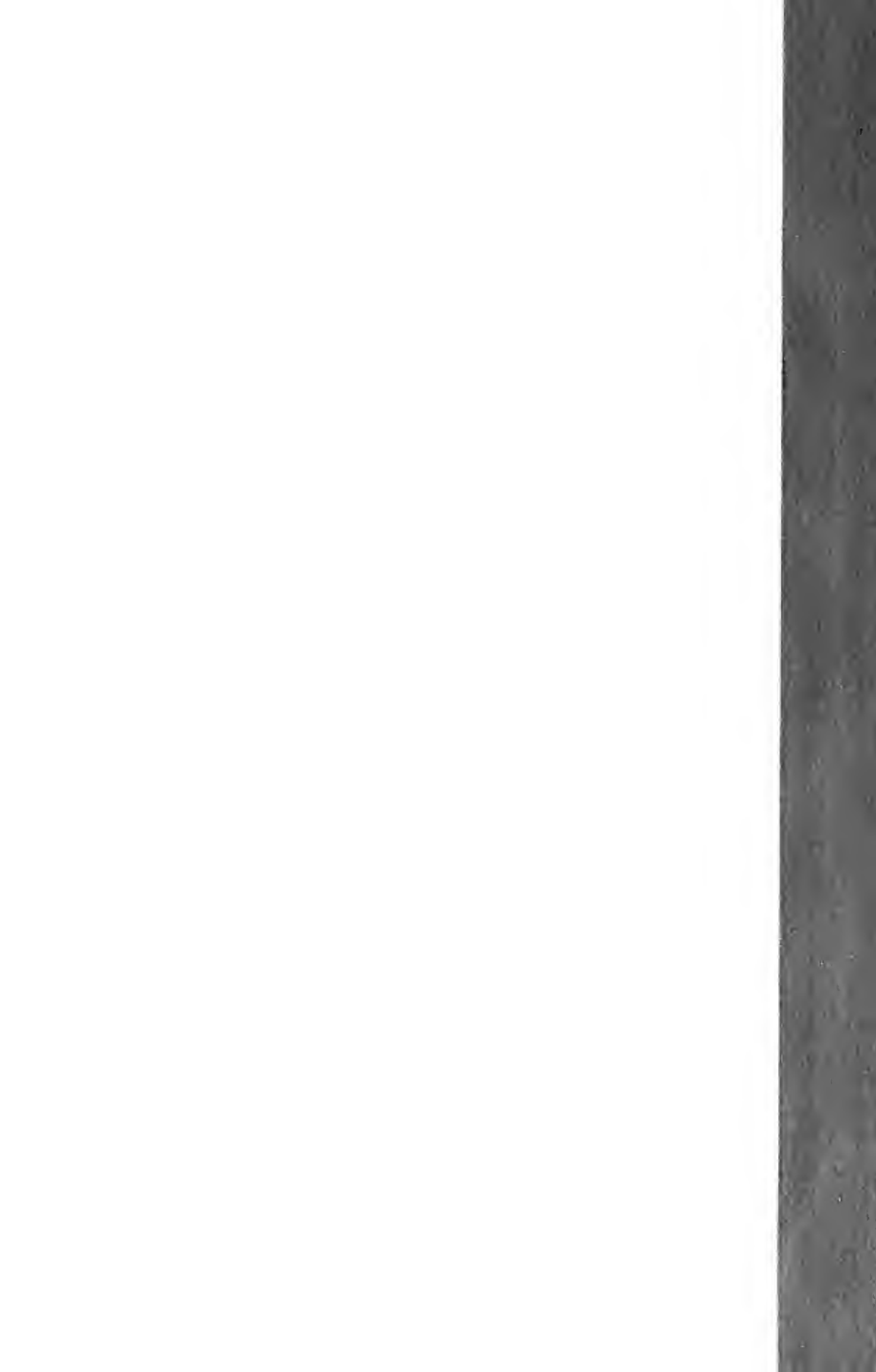
It is only the first step that costs: every succeeding step would be easier. The work of several firms, not always in the same business, might in some cases be sent together. Gradually a prosperous industrial district would grow up; and then mere self-interest would induce employers to bring down their main workshops, and even to start factories in the colony. Ultimately all would gain, but most the landowners and the railroads connected with the colony.

Railway shareholders belong to the class of people most of whom wish to do something practical for the London poor, and do not know how to do it. There is a thing that wants doing, and that they alone can do; it is to put pressure on their directors to act generously in the matter of carrying the poor. The beneficent Act just passed as to workmen's trains will much depend for its efficiency on whether the railway authorities meet it in a liberal or a higgling spirit.

The actual cost of running an extra train is generally not very great; and there is scarcely any other direction in which a very little unselfishness will purchase so much good for others; will cause so much happiness unalloyed by any harm; will do so much to raise the quality of human life.

If railways and some at least of the employers will cooperate, the committees will soon be able to provide all whom the gradual improvements need drive out of London with healthy homes without separating them from their employment. Some members might give only time, and others only money. Some committees might be small, and go shares in a colony with others; but some parts of the work could be done only by large and strong committees. A municipality or other public body could not safely do the work—there would be too much room for jobbery and imposture; but whenever the dwelling-houses of the poor were cleared away for any purpose, public or private, the requirements of conscience or of the law might in many cases be satisfied by handing over to a properly-chosen committee money enough to move the displaced poor out into the country. If such plans as these be carried out, the car of progress may roll on till every one in London is properly housed, and every house has adequate free space around it; and yet its wheels may crush under them none of the industrious poor.

Other provision must be made for those who cannot or will not work. Probably this will never be done satisfactorily till we have braced ourselves to say that being without the means of livelihood must be treated, not as a crime, but as a cause for uncompromising inspection and inquiry. So long as we shrink from the little pain that this would give, we are forced to be too kind to the undeserving, and too unkind to the unfortunate. This inspection would be facilitated by the adoption of Mr. Llewellyn Davies' proposal. It would be a part of the great movement towards bringing public and private charity into system and into harmony. Till this is done our treatment of the poor cannot cease to be tender where tenderness is the parent of crime, and hard where hardness involves needless and bitter degradation and woe.



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